

PORTRAIT

## Plan “B” for “balloon” – or: An old man takes to the skies to find happiness

If Carl Fredricksen were an English nobleman, he would probably be described as “eccentric.” Yet he is just a retired balloon vendor in a dynamic American city. In his little wooden house, Carl is like a strange relic from a past and almost forgotten age between all the skyscrapers. He doesn’t make a particularly friendly impression, keeping watch with his rectangular horn-rimmed glasses and his walking frame, fighting a losing battle to make sure that not a soul dares trespass on his property. And indeed NO-ONE has the right to disturb this cranky old man. But disturb him at what? At his daily tasks, which have become rather tedious over the years, and which he performs painfully slowly, starting when he gets up in the morning, with clicking joints and groans. Just like his clumsy hearing aid, which sometimes whistles, Mr. Fredricksen functions rather poorly and doesn’t really partake in life anymore.

Is it acceptable to laugh at someone like this? Not only is it acceptable, but necessary... initially we have to laugh at him, but soon we are laughing with him, crying, trembling with fear, clinging to the edge of our seat in suspense and finally applauding the old trooper with respect and regard. And all of this despite the fact that he is only a computer animation, just like the pudgy Wilderness Explorer Russell, the talking dog Dug, the lovably scatterbrained bird Kevin (who is actually female, as we later find out), the embittered scientist Charles Muntz and all the other characters in the latest (tenth) Disney•Pixar adventure *Up*.

This time, the makers of the colorful blockbusters *Toy Story* and *Monsters, Inc.* have turned their attention to a theme that is normally glossed over in “children’s films” as opposed to taking center-stage, namely, aging, illness and consequentially death. Thus it is not just the old square head Carl, who looks like a strange cross between James Cagney, Spencer Tracy and Walter Matthau, who makes *Up* the most “adult” film by Disney•Pixar thus far. Moreover, without sacrificing the brilliant narrative lightness which is one of the studio’s defining traits, along with the excellent animation and precise lighting, director Pete Docter and his team have tapped a new subject and in addition developed a new visual style. Inspired by the classic Disney movies of the 1930s–1950s, on the one hand, and by comic strips such as *Dennis The Menace* on the other, the character and set designers have evidently given their imagination free rein. For it would be completely absurd to realistically depict a modern fairytale like that of Carl and Russell’s sky-high adventure in an old wooden house. So the people, animals and objects are designed somewhat simply, as in a comic, yet at the same time are visualized with great dynamism and mobility, a technique for which production designer Ricky Nierva dreamed up the term “simplexity.” Thus the places and characters are products of pure fantasy; only the journey’s destination, “Paradise Falls,” is based on a real place. Towering up 1,000 meters, “Angel Falls” is the world’s highest waterfall and starts on the east flank of the 2,500-meter-high

Auyantepui mountain in Venezuela. Director Pete Docter headed there for *Up* with a small creative team to study the landscape in detail, which incidentally also served as the setting for Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (1912). By contrast, the extremely rare bird called Kevin, measuring four meters, is freely invented. He allegedly lives in this area and quickly becomes friends with the Wilderness Explorer Russell, because he shares, among other things, his love of chocolate bars.

To return to our “heroes.” Carl is no golf-playing man in his late prime and certainly not a young-at-heart “silver surfer;” he is simply old, lonely and embittered. His favorite word is “No!” with a big fat exclamation mark, and he couldn’t care less about the world of young and dynamic businesspeople. Of course, Carl Fredricksen was not always the old humbug we first meet. As we learn from a flashback, cleverly shown in fast forward and rounded out by newsreel documents (also animated), he was once a shy boy who dreamed big, and found in Ellie his best friend, soul mate and wife of many years. We also learn from the flashback that Ellie was not able to have children and that she died of a serious illness before the couple were able to fulfill their mutual childhood dream of traveling to Paradise Falls. Plot elements such as these would have been unthinkable in a classic Disney film; *Up* breaks these taboos in both a sensitive and natural way to make the hero believable and full of life.

Carl bears his age with stubborn dignity, which we only see for the first time when he takes the stair lift downstairs, grim-faced as a military general, to cast a disapproving eye over the building site right outside his front door. And as if the noise and the dust from the building site weren’t enough, there is also a very forward dork called Russell standing at the door, who wants nothing more than to help him across the street to earn his last merit badge. But Carl has absolutely no interest in crossing the street, and neither does he want Russell to give him a tour of his own garden. On the contrary, he gives Russell a task, the only purpose of which is to get rid of him, so he can focus on his actual problem. For Carl has to protect his house and dignity from those well-meaning citizens who want to pack him off to an old people’s home and tear down his house to build a skyscraper. When the men in white coats arrive to pick him up, he asks them to give him a moment to say goodbye to everything and goes back into the house. While the irreverent carers spitefully joke that he probably has to go to the bathroom again because of his weak bladder, Carl puts his “plan B” into action. Without further ado he rises up into the air, house and all, borne by a huge bundle of brightly colored balloons (when he leaves there are 20,622 to be precise). This is when the story really lifts off and the grumpy old man turns into a brave flight pioneer complete with flying cap and goggles, who hoists the net curtain and shower curtain sails to make of his old house a veritable flying machine. And when he has left the city far beneath

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him, there is a sudden knock at the door... The freezing and trembling Wilderness Explorer Russell is standing on the rather breezy terrace and asks to come in. Carl’s response, as we would expect: “No!”, followed by the door slamming. But of course he takes pity on the boy, the two become friends “perforce” and in the course of the story the unusual but inseparable pair become linked by a common destiny.

However, as Russell is such a cheeky little chatterbox, the point is reached when an annoyed Carl simply switches off his hearing aid all of a sudden and sits back in his wing-back chair with a contented smile. The acoustic effect of this action is completely unexpected in the movie theater and impressed even cineastes who were taking a peek at the press showing. It is amazing how Carl’s hearing difficulty is turned from a curse into a blessing, in a respectful and amusing way. Russell blabbers on cheerfully, while Carl enjoys a moment of divine peace. The old man can hear the boy’s voice only very quietly and seemingly from a great distance. But he can’t enjoy the breather for long, for countless dangers confront the retired aviator and his unintentional charge, not least an angry-looking bad weather front. To describe them all, however, would be to digress. In short, the aim of this great adventure is the transition from the strange caricature to the lovable “grandpa,” and despite traveling many thousands of miles and facing any number of dangers, the path to a deep friendship between two very different people is much shorter than we could ever have imagined before *Up*. And although the square Carl and egg-shaped Russell are hardly drawn realistically, they often seem more alive than some “real” movie characters, and the strange symmetry of their relationship – the old man who suddenly has a grandson without ever having had a son or daughter and the boy who is happy to find a grandpa, with his father

noticeably absent in his life – both deeply moves us and has us in fits of laughter. Finally, what we take away with us is the realization that the audacious Pixar attempt to turn a decrepit old man into the lovable hero of an adventure-cum-comedy-cum-fairytale is a resounding success.

Christian Arndt

Phonak is pleased to announce that Carl Fredericksen has agreed to become the 36th ambassador for the *Hear the World* initiative. In this role, Carl is joining the likes of Plácido Domingo, Harry Belafonte, Diane Kruger, Bryan Adams, Moby and Annie Lennox – to name but a few. Despite the fact that he is the first “virtual” ambassador, Carl will provide a real and important service for *Hear the World* by raising awareness for hearing loss.